



Rififi

Alastair Phillips

Rififi

(Jules Dassin, 1955)

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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Plot synopsis	ix
Introduction	1
1 The Route to <i>Rififi</i>	5
A cosmopolitan life	5
Hollywood and film noir	6
The politics of exile	9
The tradition of French film noir	11
Auguste le Breton and the Série Noire	16
Production history	20
Notes	28
2 Reading <i>Rififi</i>	33
Beginnings	33
<i>Du rififi chez les hommes</i> and the aesthetics of the heist thriller	41
Space and genre: the nightclub	50
Space and genre: the city	57
Men and trouble	65
A transnational film noir?	74

Notes	76
3 Reviewing <i>Rififi</i>	79
A surprise success	79
‘A film without indulgence’	82
The politics of realism	85
Audiences, trade and culture	90
Notes	94
4 Reviving <i>Rififi</i>	97
After <i>Du rififi chez les hommes</i>	97
Influences	99
The <i>rififi</i> brand	101
<i>Rififi</i> returns	102
Notes	103
Appendix 1: Credits	105
Appendix 2: Jules Dassin filmography	107
Appendix 3: Auguste Le Breton filmography	108
Appendix 4: Cited films	109
Appendix 5: ‘Rififi à travers le monde’	112
Appendix 6: Select bibliography	113
Index	117

1 The Route to *Rififi*

A cosmopolitan life

Jules Dassin (1911–2008) was born with a French-sounding name in Middletown, Connecticut in the United States. This intersection between Europe and the New World haunted his career, perhaps at no time more than when he was working on the film that is the subject of this book. Despite the peaceful sobriety of the name ‘Middletown’ – a location that because of its apparent indeterminacy might also describe Dassin’s subsequent life history as well the democratic aspirations of its forebears – the boy’s parents moved to New York where their son was raised in Harlem and educated in the Bronx. Dassin’s parents were Russian by origin (they were born in Odessa) and their decision to raise Jules in what was then the most cosmopolitan city in the world had an indelible impact on his subsequent worldview. In the mid-1930s, Dassin travelled throughout Europe, especially to countries that would later provide temporary and permanent homes to him in his professional life: France, Greece and Italy. On return, he found employment in New York’s Yiddish theatre and worked for the famous Artef Theater on 247 West 48th Street in Manhattan.¹ As a measure of his enduring chameleon-like qualities, he learned Yiddish especially in order to converse with his fellow theatre workers.

The cultural milieu in which Dassin thrived during this period provided a formative influence on his later political and cultural sensibilities. It was during this time that he was exposed to New York’s

vital left-wing theatre then flourishing in the progressive climate of the New Deal. Dassin would later claim, for example, that he joined the Communist Party after seeing the Group Theatre production of Clifford Odets's episodic drama, *Waiting for Lefty*, set among a community of taxi drivers on the verge of a strike during the Great Depression of the 1920s. Like Orson Welles, Dassin also worked in radio and it was his audio adaptation of Gogol's *The Overcoat* that led to him being noticed by the Broadway producer, Martin Gabel, who subsequently invited him to direct *The Medicine Show* by Oscar Saul and H. R. Hays at the New Yorker Theater. This, in turn, led to an invitation to work in Hollywood.

Hollywood and film noir

The historical crucible of New York's immigrant culture, radical politics and thriving theatre networks into which Dassin tapped, inspired the spread of liberal democratic ideas when many of its luminaries moved to the Hollywood studio system in Los Angeles.² Dassin initially went to the West Coast with two of his colleagues from Artef, Benno Schneider and David Opatoshu, and was employed by RKO for six months where he worked on the sets of *They Knew What They Wanted* (Garson Kanin, 1940) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Mr and Mrs Smith* (1941). He was then hired on a generous seven-year contract by MGM where an early short film he directed, *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1941), based on an Edgar Allan Poe short story, won an Academy Award. This led to his first feature, *Nazi Agent* (1942), which starred the German émigré actor Conrad Veidt. Dassin's subsequent film, *Reunion in France* (1942), is of historical interest in the light of *Du rififi chez les hommes*, his first 'true' French film 14 years later. It was a wartime resistance drama, also set in France and improbably starred Joan Crawford (opposite John Wayne) as a patriotic French aristocrat, Michele de la Becque. It was an enormous commercial success.

Perhaps because of his experiences in New York, Dassin eventually became dissatisfied with the conservative regime at MGM and, after his contract expired in 1947, he signed up with the liberal crime journalist Mark Hellinger's newly formed production unit that had recently been contracted to Universal.³ Hellinger's influence was timely. He had already

produced the émigré director Robert Siodmak's influential film noir, *The Killers*, the previous year and was attuned to the new postwar climate that favoured a greater degree of social realism within the Hollywood crime film. Like the producer Louis de Rochemont, whose works for Fox such as Henry Hathaway's *House on 92nd Street* (1945) and Elia Kazan's *Boomerang!* (1947) Dassin keenly admired, Hellinger wanted a wider use of location cinematography and a greater degree of psychological intimacy shown towards the motivations of his central protagonists. In short, he foresaw a visual equivalence between the drama of the front cover photo of a city newspaper and the true-to-life sensation of a film set on the streets where such a paper would be sold.

Dassin's first film for Hellinger was *Brute Force* (1947), a prison drama whose powerful and intimate examination of male confinement, loyalty and betrayal echoes some of the subsequent concerns of *Du rififi chez les hommes*. Like the film that followed it, *The Naked City* (1948), it avoided the presence of any prominent stars in order to reflect a more democratic concern for the potential of the ordinary human face *in situ*. *The Naked City* was based on the eponymous anthology by the New York photographer Weegee, *Naked City*, which had been published in 1945 to great acclaim. From its opening atmospheric moments, which survey the skyline of Dassin's former home, the film insists on its prominent use of urban location cinematography as a key aspect of the narration. *The Naked City*'s description of city space conveys the vernacular as much as the monumental and the intimate as much as the anonymous, and it attempts to read both these tensions in terms of class. The city is 'naked' because its surface glamour and prestige have been peeled away in favour of a more cautious scrutiny of the way social and economic conditions force people to act the way they do. Like *Du rififi chez les hommes*, it contrasts domesticity with criminality and represents images of play and childhood to suggest another kind of innocence untouched by adult corruption in a dangerous world. The film's scriptwriter Albert Maltz, then already suspected of communist sympathies, attempted to confront the inequities in wealth and status he saw in New York more overtly, but to his and Dassin's bitter regret, Universal clumsily re-edited the film prior to its release.⁴

This did not matter so much to the film's many admirers in France when it was released on 13 May 1949 under the title *La cité sans voiles*.

Writing in the communist newspaper, *Combat*, Jean-Pierre Vivet wrote, for example, that *The Naked City* 'marked an important moment in the development of American cinema ... whose roots lie in the recent school of Italian realism'.⁵ It is interesting to see here how Vivet sees this precursor of *Du rififi chez les hommes* in similar terms as a hybrid 'Euro-American' text. André Bazin likewise observed that while many other American films had been set in New York, 'no film before [*The Naked City*] had revealed such material and human diversity in its portrayal of the poverty, luxury and degradation found in neighbourhoods as varied as those found in Paris'.⁶ Such approving remarks were to form a crucial plank in the way French film culture would subsequently come to view Dassin as 'an outsider within'.⁷

After the early death of Hellinger and a brief return to the New York theatre, the director of *Du rififi chez les hommes* signed with Twentieth Century-Fox and worked with the Armenian émigré author and script-writer, A. I. Bezzerides, on a powerful adaptation of his novel *Thieves' Market, Thieves' Highway* (1949). Bezzerides would go on to have impeccable noir credentials. He had already written the script for Raoul Walsh's atmospheric trucking melodrama, *They Drive By Night* (1940) and would later work on the classic film noirs, *On Dangerous Ground* (Nicholas Ray, 1952) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955). Bezzerides and Dassin's interest in the themes of cooperation, loyalty and betrayal within the milieu of the Californian road haulage industry also bears similarities to *Du rififi chez les hommes*. Both films are driven by a keen eye for the interrelationship between the external immediacies of place and the internal psychological pressures of their troubled masculine protagonists that inhabit these locations.

By the time he had finished the film in January 1949, Dassin was well aware that there were concerns about his future prospects in Hollywood because of the ongoing influence of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). The HUAC had sought to prove that the American film industry had come under undue influence from the alleged infiltration of Communist Party members or sympathizers. Set up in 1947, it had called the famous 'Hollywood Ten' to the stand the same year; they all cited the Fifth Amendment and refused to testify.⁸ With the publication of a statement by Hollywood's leading executives following these hearings, an enduring informal blacklist had been created, which meant subterfuge on

the part of Daryl F. Zanuck in devising something to alleviate Dassin's situation.⁹ After the details of one project were leaked to the trade press, incurring the wrath of studio president Spyros P. Skouras,¹⁰ on commencing work on an adaptation of Gerald Kersh's book, *Night and the City*, Zanuck explicitly advised the director that while shooting on location in the UK he should shoot the most expensive sequences first. This was supposedly to circumvent the possibility of him being subsequently fired from the film.¹¹

Night and the City (1950) is Dassin's intermediary film noir. Made with the American actor Richard Widmark who had had previous roles in Fox urban noirs such as *Kiss of Death* (Henry Hathaway, 1947) and *The Street With No Name* (William Keighley, 1948), the film provides a dramatic portrait of the postwar London underworld. Its transnational status is signalled both by the hybridity of accents – apart from Widmark the film also features the American Gene Tierney and the British Googie Withers – and by the prominence of night-time location signage. In one telling transition, Dassin's even cuts from a view of the illuminated front of the 'American Bar' to the entrance of the 'Café de l'Europe'. The film itself was similarly divided into two in that separate versions were cut for British and American audiences. By the time Dassin returned to Hollywood from Europe, his worst fears had been realized: he was not even allowed onto the Fox lot. His American film career was apparently over.

The politics of exile

During 1950–51, Dassin returned to Europe and attempted to continue to forge a career in European film production. Ironically, given his own conflicted situation, he worked on preparations for an adaptation of Giovanni Guareschi's best-selling satirical novel, *Le Petit monde de Don Camillo*, starring the beloved French comic actor, Fernandel, as the hot-headed priest constantly at odds with the communist mayor of his village. The film's producer, Guiseppe Amato, who had also produced the neo-realist classic, *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948), eventually backed away after concerns that Dassin's presence on the production would damage the prospects of the film obtaining an important American release.¹² While at the Cannes Film Festival in 1951,

Dassin learnt that Frank Tuttle along with Edward Dmytryk had testified against him at the HUAC hearings.¹³ He decided to return again to the United States.

There was no work for Dassin in Los Angeles and instead he took up an offer to direct Bette Davies in a Broadway revue called *Two's Company*. It was during rehearsals in 1952 that he was finally summoned by the HUAC to testify. Unlike his friend and colleague from his New York theatre days, Elia Kazan, whose own betrayal in front of the HUAC that same year had so angered him, Dassin never actually got to testify. He insisted that the production of *Two's Company* had to go ahead and, after the intervention of the election of President Eisenhower in November, just as he was getting ready to travel to Washington he received a telegram declaring that his hearing had been postponed indefinitely. Dassin has claimed in various interviews that he would have been a willing participant in the HUAC sessions and would have been prepared to defend himself.¹⁴ This may be the logic of hindsight, but there is no doubt that the episode finally put paid to his employment prospects in the United States.

The following years leading up to *Du rififi chez les hommes* were therefore hard ones for the director and they account for the alacrity with which Dassin eventually began working on the film. He travelled back to France to work on *L'Ennemi public no. 1*, with Fernandel again and Zsa Zsa Gabor. Once more, the blacklist intervened. Jacques Bar, the film's producer, contacted Roy Brewer, head of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), for information on Dassin. Brewer replied via the IATSE's European representative, Irwing Brown, that Dassin was presumed to have communist links and ten days before shooting was due to commence, he contacted Bar directly saying that if Dassin were employed the film would be denied any kind of release in the United States.¹⁵ This degree of censorship outraged the French. Dassin was by then an admired director in France and for this, as well as his probable symbolic political currency, he was nominated an honorary member of the French directors' union as a mark of solidarity. The French film industry formed a support group led by Jacques Becker whose seminal film noir, *Touchez pas au grisbi* (1954), would become a comparative benchmark of quality for many critics after the release of *Du rififi chez les hommes*. 'L'Affaire Dassin', as it then became known, came to nothing though. Its historical significance

remains, as we shall see later, in its status as a key instance of the problematic Franco-American cultural relationship in the postwar period.

Dassin spent his time in a village outside Paris maintaining contact with fellow émigrés such as the blacklisted director John Berry. For a while the authorities revoked his passport. Various projects failed to get off the ground, including adaptations of Giovanni Verga's Sicilian literary classic, *Mastro don Gesualdo* and Emmanuel Roblès's novel, *Cela s'appelle l'aurore*.¹⁶ In the end, it was a phone call from his friend, the producer Henri Bérard, that saved the day. Rather than straightforward high culture, would Dassin turn to one of the best-selling Série Noire books? After years of collaboration and friendship with many of the best practitioners of American film noir, Dassin was now to work on one of the finest *French* film noirs ever made.

The tradition of French film noir

Jules Dassin's *Du rififi chez les hommes* arrived on French screens at a crucial moment in the tangled critical and production history of French film noir. That one of French film noir's greatest successes was, in fact, directed by an American with substantial experience in its Hollywood equivalent is apt in a way, for it points to the fascinating historical intercultural web underpinning the formation of the genre.

It is worth briefly examining French critical investment in the term 'film noir' before turning to the specificities of the form in France and some preliminary aspects of its subsequent relationship to Dassin's film. It is now largely acknowledged that the term 'film noir', while usually taken to refer to a substantial body of work produced by the Hollywood studios during the 1940s and early 1950s, was in fact coined in France during the late 1930s. Charles O'Brien has noticed, for example, that from January 1938 to September 1939 the term began to appear within French critical discourse in relation to such poetic realist films as *Le Quai des brumes* (Marcel Carné, 1937); *Le Puritain* (Jeff Musso, 1937); *La Tradition de minuit* (Roger Richebé, 1939) and *L'Étrange M. Victor* (Jean Grémillon, 1938).¹⁷ Indeed, writing of the émigré Curt Courant's cinematography in *La Bête humaine* (Jean Renoir, 1938), Emile Vuillermoz specifically noted

that ‘*noir* is currently the colour in fashion in our studios’.¹⁸ What is important here is how what was initially an ‘essentially affective response’¹⁹ then also became aligned to entrenched political positions taken up by French critics on the right and left. For both the right-wing François Vinneuil and the left-wing Georges Sadoul, for example, noir had its own pejorative aspect that threatened to contravene ‘the morality of the national culture’.²⁰ Certainly, as we shall later see, this conjugation of transgressive potential and national morality was also to matter in relation to the reception of *Du rififi chez les hommes* in postwar France.

If ‘film noir’ as a critical term was first employed by French critics in relation to French film, it was also first used by French critics in relation to American cinema. In an important pair of articles published in 1946 in response to the renewed presence of Hollywood cinema on French screens after the years of the Occupation (1940–44), Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier noted the new perverse criminal psychologies visible in films such as *Murder My Sweet*, *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) and *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944).²¹ Chartier felt that while earlier poetic realist films like *Le Quai des brumes* were redeemed by the presence of love – ‘at least the mirage of a better world’ – ‘there is none of that in the films before us now’.²² Frank, interestingly in relation to the subsequent impact of Dassin’s directorial style in *Du rififi chez les hommes*, also observed the crucial impact of ‘facial expressions, gestures, utterances’ to the films’ narrative style, especially in relation to the evident ‘primacy of the script, and the fact that a film is first and foremost a sober story well constructed and presented in an original manner’.²³ ‘Has Hollywood definitively outclassed Paris?’ he tentatively asked.²⁴

French critical praise for American noir style, especially to the detriment of much considered evaluation of the significance of French traditions, continued and reached a kind of apogee with the publication of the seminal critical study by Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, *Panorama du film noir américain*, in the same year as the release of *Du rififi chez les hommes*. Indeed, the original cover of Borde and Chaumeton’s book actually featured a distinctive still from Dassin’s *Night and the City* – a powerful signal of the veneration in which the French now held the American film noir director. Dassin, like other major American directors such as Nicholas Ray that the French critics of

the 1950s favoured, was seen as both an individual agent – an ‘auteur’ – and as a victim of the Hollywood system. Borde and Chaumeton explicitly noted, for example, how the personal quality of his work on *Brute Force* and *The Naked City* had suffered at the hands of studio heads at the editing stage. Nonetheless, in 1955 they were able to recollect that ‘the simultaneous showing in Paris during winter 1951 of Elia Kazan’s *Panic in the Streets* (1950), Jules Dassin’s *Night and the City* (1950), and John Huston’s *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) [had been] the cinematic event of the season’.²⁵ In an echo of the narrative concerns of Dassin’s next film noir shot in France, they then described how all three films ‘thrust aside the glistening folds in which the modern big city garbs itself by night, in order to plunge into the feverish and desolate world of gambling joints, lowlife types, and nightclubs’.²⁶

The period between 1954 and 1955 is particularly crucial in the history of French film noir. In the year leading up to the release of Dassin’s film and Borde and Chaumeton’s book, the success especially of Becker’s *Touchez pas au grisbi* with the French public had led to a proliferation of related titles. For Borde and Chaumeton, the ‘season has [now] been placed under the aegis of the “noir”’.²⁷ Even an Italian melodrama, *Processo contra ignoto* (Guido Brignone, 1952), they noted, had had its anonymous title changed on its French release to the then more fashionable, *C’est la faute au grisbi* [*Blame it on the Loot*].

What then did ‘French film noir’ consist of in their eyes? Borde and Chaumeton discerned three trends at the time. First, there was the ‘criminal psychology based on suspense’²⁸ such as Henri Georges Clouzot’s contemporaneous success, *Les Diaboliques* (1955).²⁹ Second, there was ‘the police documentary’ typified by another current hit, *Razzia sur la chnouf* (Henri Decoin, 1955), although the origins of its then current revival, they also suggested, lay in earlier films such as *Quai des Orfèvres* (Henri Georges Clouzot, 1947) and *Un flic* (Maurice de Canonge, 1947). Then, finally, they described the ‘films about the underworld’ of which Becker’s and Dassin’s films, despite their significant differences, may be said to be the most prominent and most enduring examples.

Borde and Chaumeton also mentioned the popular success of the critically neglected cycle of low-budget, humorous crime action films begun with André Hunebelle’s trilogy starring Raymond Rouleau – *Mission*

à *Tanger* (1949), *Méfiez-vous des blondes* (1950) and *Massacre en dentelles* (1951) – and continued by Bernard Borderie's début *Les Loups chassent la nuit* (1952). It is clear, although the writers did not say so at the time, that with the subsequent success of the Lemmy Caution comic-thriller series starring the American émigré actor Eddie Constantine, the supposed lines between French and American film culture were beginning to be deliberately crossed for parodic ends. By 1955, the series that Jean Sacha's *Cet homme est dangereux* (1953) had initiated and that had taken off with Bernard Borderie's *La Môme vert-de-gris* (1953) and *Les Femmes s'en balancent* (1954), had also recently spawned other Eddie Constantine vehicles directed by Dassin's fellow Hollywood émigré, John Berry – *Ça va barder* (1954) and *Je suis un sentimental* (1955). John Berry's own links with the tradition of the American crime film went back to the 1930s when he co-wrote *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931). He had also directed *Casbah* (1948), the second American remake of *Pépé le moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1937). *Du rififi chez les hommes*, as we are beginning to see, therefore inhabited a complex lineage that points both to a turbulent awareness of the success of the American crime film and to the persistence of a French model, with the possibility of a hybrid model somewhere in between.

We shall return to the complexities of Franco-American film relations with particular reference to the reception of *Du rififi chez les hommes* later on, but now I want to unpick the ways in which the historical account provided of French film noir so far seems to have marginalized certain aspects of the phenomenon in France, especially those that have a particular bearing on the importance of Dassin's film. As Ginette Vincendeau has argued, the spectatorial pleasures involved in watching French crime cinema of the period differed significantly from the American model Frank and Chartier described, especially in terms of the useful distinction that can retrospectively be drawn between the *policier*, typified by the Albert Préjean series of Maigret adaptations such as *Cécile est morte* (Maurice Tourneur, 1944), and what Vincendeau terms the 'social noir', exemplified by films such as *Une si jolie petite plage* (Yves Allégret, 1949).³⁰ While many *policiers*, especially of the immediate postwar period, were 'predominately recast as light comedy',³¹ Vincendeau argues, the darkest films such as *Quai des Orfèvres* were actually ones that relied as

much on an atmospheric 'French quotidian realism' as 'generic noir features'.³² Why then did French critics at the time not immediately link the 'sociological and topographical precision' of French 'social noir' to the success of American film noir? In part, it was due to the immediate legacy of the Occupation and a negative association between the legacy of the visual style of poetic realism and the tragedy of defeat. As Vincendeau puts it, 'since the term [had been] generally used in France in a derogatory way, [noir temporarily] needed to be detached from its French context in order to celebrate the American films.'³³

Du rififi chez les hommes and *Touchez pas au grisbi* thus suggest a turning point in the generic evolution of French crime cinema. Neither film appears especially marked by any of the pervasive melancholy or despair of poetic realism. As François Guérif has noted, immediately prior to the resurgence of the gangster film in the mid-1950s, narratives favouring ordinary people like the author of detective novels in *Le Témoin de minuit* (Dimitri Kirsanoff, 1953) or the director of a municipal library in *Leur dernière nuit* (Georges Lacombe, 1953) had increasingly come to deglamourize the representation of crime.³⁴ These were characters affected not so much by tragic pre-destiny as the momentary flash of emotional impulse. *Touchez pas au grisbi* and *Du rififi chez les hommes* present a significant variant of this relationship to the everyday, which in the case of the latter was especially conveyed by its explicit association with criminal literature. The author of its source novel, Auguste Le Breton (1913–99), publicly vaunted his affinity with the real-life underworld of Paris – an association, he argued, directly informed the subject of his story. The audience's relationship to criminal activity was therefore not mediated through the depiction of the act of writing or librarianship, as was the case with the films of Kirsanoff and Lacombe; it was compellingly suggested by the detailed immersion in the experiential act of crime itself.

This attention to location and character detail is what makes French cinema's return to the gangster genre so noteworthy. Although *Touchez pas au grisbi* and *Du rififi chez les hommes* differ in terms of their actual treatment of the heist – all the narrative action in the former takes place after the event – they both offer a familiar topography of nocturnal city streets, bars, restaurants and nightclubs, which provides the setting for the unravelling of familial loyalties centred on the figure of an ageing criminal

patriarch (played by Jean Servais and Jean Gabin respectively). The films have a melancholic seasonal air in their Parisian location sequences that further accentuates the intimacy and familiarity of their intricately detailed interiors. This is especially true in the carefully realized portrayal of Madame Bouche's restaurant in *Touchez pas au grisbi*, which serves as a kind of protective maternal space apart from the masculine treachery of the world outside. Vincendeau has argued that the emphasis in these films on the representation of virile masculinity and the themes of 'loyalty and betrayal' enhances the way in which they may be read as coded representations of the Occupation.³⁵ This is a convincing argument but, as she also points out, it is equally important to note how a sense of transition is also evoked in terms of the films' dramatic structure and the depiction of competing interests signalled by the 'old France' and 'the new'. The tensions within the male groups in both films portray not just a battleground that has echoes of the past, but one that also points to a nation in transition. In *Touchez pas au grisbi* this is exemplified by Max's awareness of both his own ageing process and the generational shift underway within the underworld. It is symptomatic, if also problematic, for example, that at the end of the film he decides to relinquish his French Renault – whose 'F' for France is repeatedly brought to the forefront in the film's *mise-en-scène* – for a smart new American car. He subsequently visits Madame Bouche's restaurant in it, but now sits apart from the others with his new American girlfriend, Betty. In *Du rififi chez les hommes*, the 'changing of the guard' is visible in the contrast between Tony's decrepitude and the strength of Pierre, the boss of the Grutter clan, as well as the relationship between the ailing French gangster and his godson, Tonio, who turns instead to Hollywood for his cultural influence.

Auguste Le Breton and the *Série Noire*

The intercultural formation of Jules Dassin's adaptation of Auguste Le Breton's novel was but one further instance of the complex relationship between European and American forms within the associated spheres of French crime literature and French crime cinema. In her study of the influence of the *roman noir* on French postwar culture, Claire Gorrara points

Index

27 Rue de la Paix, 30, 109

À bout de souffle, 63, 109

Abd el-Krim, 53

Agostini, Philippe, 2, 25, 50, 74, 80,
84, 94, 105

Aisner, Henri, 25, 110

Aldrich, Robert, 8, 109

Algeria, 20

Allégret, Marc, 25

Allégret, Yves, 14, 23, 109, 111

Alton, John, 75

Amato, Guiseppe, 9

America, 1, 17, 18, 80

Angèle, 23, 109

Angélique, 24

Arc de Triomphe, 63

Arcouët, Serge, 18

Argentina, 99

Arletty, 71

Artef Theater, 5, 6

Ascenseur pour l'échafaud, 21, 109

Auric, Georges, 3, 25, 43, 71, 97,
105

Baker, Josephine, 93

Balzac, Emile, 84

Bank of Belgium, 101

Bar, Jacques, 10, 102

Baroncelli, Jean de, 87

Barzman, Ben, 97, 98

Baudelaire, 17

Bazin, André, 8, 74, 86, 87, 89

Bechet, Sidney, 93

Becker, Harold, 102

Becker, Jacques, 2, 10, 13, 23, 27, 33,
79, 87, 91, 100, 110, 111

Belleville, 26, 34, 50

Belmondo, Jean-Paul, 63, 75

Bérard, Henri, 11, 20, 23, 97, 105

Bernard, Raymond, 23, 110

Bernhardt, Curtis, 18, 109

Berry, John, 11, 14, 88, 109

Bezzarides, A. I., 8

blacklist, 8, 10, 22, 67, 98

Blanchar, Pierre, 101

Blum-Byrnes agreement, 91

Bob le flambeur, 20, 21, 22, 51, 98,
102, 108, 109

Boomerang, 7, 109

Borde, Raymond, 12, 13, 18, 74

Borderie, Bernard, 14, 24, 108–10

Borger, Lenny, 23, 81

Boubat, Edouard, 50

Bouche, Madame, 16

Bovis, Marcel, 50

Bresson, Robert, 100, 111

Breton, Auguste Le, 1, 2, 15, 16, 19,
20, 21, 22, 27, 53, 79, 80, 87, 98,
99, 102, 105, 108

Brewer, Roy, 10

Briac, Claude, 20

Brigade antigangs, 24, 108, 109

Brignone, Guido, 13, 110

Britain, 1

Bronx, 5

Brown, Irwing, 10

Brute Force, 7, 13, 107

Bruzzi, Stella, 69

Buñuel, Luis, 24

Burch, Noël, 66

Buss, Robin, 67

C'est la faute au grisbi, 13

Ça va barder, 14, 109

Cain, James M., 18

Cambodia, 99

Campi, Yves, 20

Cannes Film Festival, 3, 10, 80, 82,
84, 97, 98

Canonge, Maurice de, 13, 111

Carné, Marcel, 11, 18, 25, 26, 71, 86,
109, 110

Carrefour, 18, 109

Casbah, 14, 109

Cauchy, Daniel, 21

Cécile est morte, 14, 109

Cela s'appelle l'aurore, 11

Celui qui doit mourir, 31, 97, 98, 107

Centre National de la

Cinématographie (CNC), 91

César le Milanais, 21, 33–5, 43, 45,
47, 49, 54, 65, 66, 70, 72, 73, 84,
87, 106

Cet homme est dangereux, 14, 109

Chabrol, Claude, 79

Chandler, Raymond, 18

Chartier, Jean-Pierre, 12, 14

Chase, James Hadley, 17

Chaumeton, Etienne, 12, 13, 18,
74

Chavet, Louis, 82

Cheyney, Peter, 17

Chicago, 59, 81

Christ Recrucifié, 97

Christian-Jaque, 21, 109, 110

Cinémathèque Française, 92

Clouzot, Henri Georges, 13, 83, 110

Collection Minuit, 17

Collinson, Peter, 100, 111

Comédie Française, 23, 24

Commission de Contrôle des Films
Cinématographiques, 27

Communist Party, 6, 8, 89, 91

Confédération Générale du Travail
(CGT), 91

Connecticut, 5

Constantine, Eddie, 14, 94, 101

Courant, Curt, 11, 26

Courbevoie, 27

Crackers, 101, 109

Crawford, Joan, 6

Crowther, Bosley, 80

Cuc, Pierre, 22

Daquin, Louis, 91

Darcey, Janine, 24, 106

Dary, René, 21

Dassin, Jules, 1–3, 5–14, 16, 18,
20–3, 25, 27–8, 33–4, 37, 41–2,
44–5, 47, 49, 52, 54, 57–9, 61–3,
65–8, 70–2, 74–5, 79–80, 82–93,
97–102, 105–6, 108

Davies, Bette, 10

Davies, Miles, 94

De Sica, Vittorio, 9, 109

Decaë, Henri, 99

Decoin, Henri, 13, 108, 110

Deflandre, Bernard, 105

Delon, Alain, 70, 75, 102

Deray, Jacques, 101, 108

Dimendberg, Edward, 59, 62

Dmytryk, Edward, 10, 109, 110

Double Indemnity, 12, 62, 109

Drôle de drame, 18, 109

Du rififi à Paname, 101, 108

Du rififi à Tokyo, 101, 108

Du rififi chez les femmes, 101, 108,
109

Du rififi chez les hommes, 1–3, 6–8,
10–12, 14–15, 17–21, 23, 26, 28,
33–4, 37, 40–2, 50, 52, 57, 59,
63, 65–7, 74–6, 79–80, 82–90,
92–4, 97–103, 107–8

Dubreuilh, Simone, 84

Duchesne, Roger, 21

Duhamel, Marcel, 17, 18, 24

Dupré, Madame, 62

Duvivier, Julien, 14, 74, 91, 110,
111
Dwyre, Roger, 26, 97, 105

Eisenhower, President, 10
Ellington, Duke, 94
Entrée des artistes, 25, 109

Fédération Française des Ciné-Clubs
(FFCC), 89, 92
femme fatale, 51
Fernandel, 9, 10
Ferrati, Mario, 21, 23, 35, 39, 41, 43,
54, 59, 60, 65, 69, 70, 72, 73,
106, 109
Feuillade, Louis, 17, 109
Feyder, Jacques, 86
film noir, 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12,
13, 14, 18, 19, 29, 41, 51, 53, 59,
62, 74, 75, 86, 88, 89, 90, 93
Finistère, 19
Ford, John, 84, 94
Foucard, Pierre, 79
Fox, 7, 9
France, 1, 5, 7, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16–19,
21, 26, 39, 40, 74, 75, 80, 81, 82,
84, 85, 88, 90–2, 94, 100
Franju, Georges, 85
Frank, Nino, 12, 14
French, Philip, 1

Gabel, Martin, 6
Gabin, Jean, 16, 21, 23, 52, 71, 79,
99
Gabor, Zsa Zsa, 10
Gaboriau, Emile, 17
gangster film, 2, 15, 34, 65, 69, 87,
88, 101
Germany, 21, 101
Gide, André, 17
Gilda, 52, 109
Giovanni, José, 100, 108
Girardot, Annie, 99
Godard, Jean-Luc, 63, 109

Gogol, Nikolai, 6
Goodis, David L., 18
Gorrara, Claire, 17, 18, 19
Granger, Derek, 81
Grangier, Gilles, 99, 108, 110
Gray, F. Gary, 102
Great Depression, 6
Greece, 5, 97
Grémillon, Jean, 11, 110
Group Theatre, 6
Grutter family, 16, 21, 24, 34, 39, 42,
52, 57, 63, 65, 67
Grutter, Louis, 106
Grutter, Pierre, 24, 52, 61, 89, 106
Grutter, Rémi, 24, 52, 62, 106
Guareschi, Giovanni, 9
Guérif, François, 15, 103
Guitry, Sacha, 24

Hammett, Dashiell, 17
Harlem, 5
Hathaway, Henry, 7, 9, 109
Hawks, Howard, 79
Hays, H. R., 6
Hayward, Susan, 67
Heist, 100, 109
heist film, 3, 20, 33, 42, 98, 99
Hellinger, Mark, 6, 7, 8
Henri Maupiou, 42
Hitchcock, Alfred, 6, 110
Hollywood, 6–9, 11–14, 16, 22, 26,
58, 63, 67, 74, 79, 81, 90–4, 97,
102
Hollywood Ten, 8
Hong Kong, 99
Hossein, Robert, 23, 79, 101, 106
Hôtel du nord, 71, 109
House on 92nd Street, 7, 109
House Un-American Activities
Committee (HUAC), 2, 8, 10
Hunebelle, André, 14, 25, 110
Huston, John, 13, 39, 111

I Soliti ignoti, 100, 109

- Ida Ferrati, 35, 66, 69, 73, 106
Inside Man, 100, 109
 Institut des Hautes Études
 Cinématographiques (IDHEC),
 91
 International Alliance of Theatrical
 Stage Employees (IATSE), 10
 Istanbul, 98
 Italy, 5, 41
 Ivens, Joris, 85
 Izis, 50
- Jasset, Victorin-Hippolyte, 17
Je suis un sentimental, 14, 109
 Jeancolas, Jean-Pierre, 92
Jeunesse, 23, 109
 Jo le Suedois, 21, 23, 33, 34, 38, 39,
 42, 47, 49, 50, 52, 54, 61, 62, 65,
 67, 68, 70, 72, 73, 102, 106
 Joffé, Alex, 101, 108, 109
 Jordan, Neil, 102, 108, 111
Jour de Fête, 21, 109
 Jouvét, Louis, 25
- Kanin, Garson, 6, 111
 Kazan, Elia, 7, 10, 13, 109, 110
 Kazantzakis, Nikos, 97
 Keighley, 9, 111
 Kelly, Gene, 98
 Kersh, Gerald, 9
 Kirsanoff, Dimitri, 15, 23, 110
Kiss Me Deadly, 8, 62, 109
Kiss of Death, 9, 109
 Krasker, Robert, 84
 Kubrick, Stanley, 100, 111
 Kuisel, Richardx, 92
- L’Affaire Dassin, 10, 90
L’Affaire Lerouge, 17
 L’Age d’Or, 24, 25, 34, 50, 52, 61, 87,
 100
L’Ennemi public no. 1, 10, 110
L’Étrange M. Victor, 11, 110
La Bête humaine, 12, 109
- La cité sans voiles*, 7
La Loi des rues, 19, 108
La Môme vert-de-gris, 14, 109
La Tradition de minuit, 11, 109
 Lacombe, Georges, 15, 23, 109, 110
Ladri di biciclette, 9, 109
 Lambert, Gavin, 81
 Lang, Fritz, 50, 79, 111
 Langlois, Henri, 92
 Larue, Jacques, 24, 105
Laura, 12, 109
Le Cercle rouge, 68, 99, 110
Le Clan des Siciliens, 100, 108, 110
Le Crime de Monsieur Lange, 18, 24,
 110
Le Deuxième souffle, 68, 110
Le Doulos, 75
Le Drame de Shanghai, 23, 110
Le Jour se lève, 26, 71, 110
 Le Masque, 17
Le Mystère de la chambre jaune, 25,
 110
Le Petit monde de Don Camillo, 9,
 110
Le Plaisir, 23, 110
Le Puritain, 11, 110
Le Quai des brumes, 11, 12, 110
Le Rouge est mis, 99, 108, 110
Le Samouraï, 70, 75, 110
Le Témoin de minuit, 15, 110
Le Trou, 100, 110
 Lee, John Silver, 18
 Lee, Spike, 100, 109
 Lejeune, C. A., 81
 Leroux, Gaston, 25
Les Diaboliques, 13, 83, 110
Les Enfants du paradis, 25, 110
Les Femmes s’en balancent, 14
Les Femmes s’en balancent, 27
 Les Halles, 74
Les Hauts murs, 19
Les Loups chassent la nuit, 14, 110
Les Misérables, 23, 110
Les Portes de la nuit, 25, 110

- Les Trois mousquetaires*, 25, 110
Leur dernière nuit, 15, 110
Loi d'aide, 91, 92
 London, 9, 26, 42, 102
 Los Angeles, 6, 10, 62
 Louise, 24, 34, 38, 39, 66, 68, 106
 Lupin, Arsène, 41
 Lupovici, Marcel, 23, 106

 Mackenzie, John, 101, 111
 McRoy, Horace, 18
Mademoiselle Docteur, 23, 110
 Mado, 24, 34, 35, 51, 54, 61, 66, 106
 Magny, Claude-Edmonde, 17
 Maigret, 14, 17, 89
 Malle, Louis, 21, 101, 109
 Maltz, Albert, 7
 Mamet, David, 100, 109
 Manchester, 102
 Manhattan, 5, 80
 Mann, Anthony, 75
 Mann, Michael, 100, 111
 Manuel, Robert, 23, 106
 Mappin & Webb, 34, 40, 42, 44, 52
 Marquet, Jean-Paul, 82, 83, 87, 89
 Martain, Gilles, 86
Massacre en dentelles, 14, 110
Mastro don Gesualdo, 11
 Maure, Jean-Paul, 83, 108
Méfiez-vous des blondes, 14, 110
Mélodie en sous-sol, 100, 110
 Melville, Jean-Pierre, 20, 51, 66, 67, 68, 75, 98, 99, 108, 109, 110
 Ménilmontant, 26
 Mercouri, Melina, 97, 98
 Mexico, 97
 MGM, 6, 102
 Middletown, 5
 Milestone, Lewis, 100, 110
 Minnelli, Vincente, 94
Minuit... Quai de Bercy, 21, 110
Mission à Tanger, 14, 110
 Möhner, Carl, 23, 52, 97, 106
 Monicello, Mario, 100

 Montmartre, 19, 33, 51, 81
 Morin, Edgar, 91
 Morocco, 53
 Morris, Howard, 101, 111
 Moskowitz, Gene, 80
Mr and Mrs Smith, 6
Murder My Sweet, 12
Murders in the Rue Morgue, 17
 Musso, Jeff, 11, 110

Naked City, 7, 8
 Narcejac, Thomas, 18
Nazi Agent, 6, 107
 Nelson, Ralph, 102, 110
 neo-realism, 85, 86
Never on a Sunday, 98
 New Deal, 6
 New York, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 26, 27, 42, 59, 81, 102
 New Yorker Theater, 6
 Newbury, 101
Night and the City, 9, 12, 107
 Noël, Magali, 24, 54, 106
 Nouvelle Vague, 1, 92, 99

 O'Brien, Charles, 11
 Occupation, 12, 15, 16, 17, 22, 91
Ocean's Eleven, 100, 102, 110
Ocean's Thirteen, 102
Ocean's Twelve, 102
Odds Against Tomorrow, 43, 100, 110
 Odessa, 5
 Odets, Clifford, 6
On Dangerous Ground, 8, 62, 110
Once a Thief, 102, 110
 Opatoshu, David, 6
 Ophuls, Max, 23, 110

 Pabst, G. W., 23, 110
 Pacino, Al, 102
 Pagnol, Marcel, 23, 109
 Palance, Jack, 102
Panic in the Streets, 13, 110

*Panorama du film noir**américain*, 12

Paris, 8, 11, 12, 13, 15, 19, 22,
25, 34, 39, 40, 57, 59, 61, 62,
63, 74, 75, 80, 82, 84, 86, 87,
89, 91, 92, 93, 99, 100, 102,
105

Paris, Anatole, 105

Pattelière, Denys de la, 101, 108

Pépé le moko, 14, 110

Philippe-Gérard, M., 24, 105

Pietr le Letton, 17

Pigalle, 76, 81, 103

Place de l'Opéra, 58

Place Pigalle, 26, 51

Place Vendôme, 40

Poe, Edgar Allan, 6, 17

poetic realism, 15, 18, 74, 86

Pont de Bir Hakeim, 26

Port Royal, 61

Préjean, Albert, 14

Preminger, Otto, 12, 109

Prévert, Jacques, 18, 86

Processo contra ignoto, 13, 110

Proust, Marcel, 17

Quai des Orfèvres, 13, 15, 110*Quartier sans soleil*, 23, 110

Ray, Nicholas, 8, 13, 79, 110

Razzia sur la chnouf, 13, 19, 21,
24, 58, 79, 88, 108, 110

realism, 3, 7, 8, 15, 26, 74, 77, 82,
84, 85, 86, 87, 90

Reed, Carol, 84, 111

Reggiani, Serge, 25

Renoir, Jean, 12, 18, 86, 109,
110

Reservoir Dogs, 100, 111*Reunion in France*, 6

Rey, H. F., 89

Richebé, Roger, 11, 109

Rififi à la Americana, 101*Rififi am Karfreitag*, 101*Rififi Means Trouble*, 81

Ripley, Arthur, 62, 111

Ritchie, Guy, 100, 111

RKO, 6

Roblès, Emmanuel, 11

Rochemont, Louis de, 7

Roman Catholic Legion of
Decency, 81

Rome, 101

Rosay, Françoise, 101

Ross, Kristin, 66

Rossellini, Roberto, 74

Rouleau, Raymond, 14

Rue de la Paix, 26, 34, 44,
52

Ruttman, Walter, 85

Sabouret, Marie, 24, 106

Sacha, Jean, 14, 109, 111

Sadoul, Georges, 12, 88, 89

Saint-Germain, 94

St Rémy les Chevreuse, 26, 39, 61, 3

San Francisco, 78, 101, 102

Saul, Oscar, 6

Scarlet Street, 62

Schneider, Benno, 6

Second World War, 19, 75

Segogne, Henry de, 27

Seine, River, 60, 76

Sellier, Geneviève, 66

Série Noire, 1, 2, 11, 16, 17, 18,
19, 79, 88, 89

Servais, Jean, 16, 23, 25, 81, 84,
90, 94, 97, 102, 106

Si Versailles m'était conté, 24, 111

Sica, Vittorio de, 74

Signoret, Simone, 91

Simenon, Georges, 17, 84

Simonin, Albert, 19

Singer, Bryan, 100, 111

Siodmak, Robert, 7, 111

Skouras, Spyros P., 9

Snatch, 100, 111

social noir, 14, 74

- Société Nouvelle Pathé Cinéma,
27, 105
- Soderburgh, Steven, 100
- Sorlin, Pierre, 93
- Spain, 101
- Spillane, Mickey, 18, 80
- Stengel, Christian, 21, 110
- Surrealists, 75
- Suzanne, 39, 62
- Tarentino, Quentin, 100, 111
- Tati, Jacques, 21, 109
- The Asphalt Jungle*, 13, 39, 58, 60,
75, 99, 111
- The Big Heat*, 50, 62, 111
- The Good Thief*, 102, 108, 111
- The Italian Job*, 100, 102, 111
- The Killers*, 7, 111
- The Killing*, 100, 111
- The Long Good Friday*, 101, 111
- The Medicine Show*, 6
- The Naked City*, 7, 8, 13, 59, 68, 75,
85, 107
- The Overcoat*, 6
- The Public Enemy*, 14, 111
- The Street With No Name*, 9,
111
- The Street Without Name*, 58
- The Tell-Tale Heart*, 6, 107
- The Third Man*, 85, 111
- The Usual Suspects*, 100, 111
- They Drive By Night*, 8, 111
- They Knew What They Wanted*, 6,
111
- Thief*, 100, 111
- Thieves' Market, Thieves' Highway*,
8
- Thompson, Jim, 18
- thriller, 1, 2, 14, 21, 27, 41, 43, 79,
89, 90, 91, 93
- Thunder Road*, 62, 111
- Tierney, Gene, 9
- Tonio, 16, 38, 39, 61, 62, 63, 65, 67,
68, 76, 89, 106
- Tony le Stéphanois, 16, 19, 21, 23,
28, 34–5, 37, 39, 42, 50–2, 54,
57–61, 63, 65, 67–8, 71, 72–3,
75, 87, 106
- Topkapi*, 22, 98, 107
- Touchez pas au grisbi*, 2, 10, 13, 15,
19, 21, 23, 27, 33, 34, 52, 58, 67,
72, 79, 87, 111
- Tourneur, Maurice, 14, 109
- Trauner, Alexandre, 3, 24–6, 105
- Truffaut, François, 26, 79, 82, 84, 85,
111
- Tuilleries, 76
- Turkey, 24
- Tuttle, Frank, 10, 111
- Twentieth Century-Fox, 8
- Two's Company*, 10
- Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*,
100, 111
- Un flic*, 13, 111
- Une si jolie petite plage*, 14, 23, 111
- Unifrance, 79, 85
- United States, 1, 5, 10, 67, 68, 85, 88,
90, 97
- Universal, 6, 7
- Veidt, Conrad, 6
- Ventura, Lino, 99
- Verga, Giovanni, 11
- Verneuil, Henri, 100, 108, 110
- Vian, Boris, 18
- Vidor, Charles, 52, 109
- Vienna, 84
- Vincendeau, Ginette, 14, 16, 17, 26,
41, 66, 92, 93, 94
- Vinneuil, François, 12
- Vivet, Jean-Pierre, 8
- Viviane, 34, 37, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57,
66, 69, 70, 76, 106
- Voici le temps des assassins*, 74, 111
- Vuillermoz, Emile, 12
- Waiting for Lefty*, 6

Walsh, Raoul, 8, 111
 Washington, 10, 91
 Wayne, John, 6
 Weegee, 7
 Welles, Orson, 6, 75
 Wellman, William, 14, 111
 Wheeler, René, 21, 108
Who's Minding the Mint, 101, 111

Widmark, Richard, 9
 Wilder, Billy, 12, 109
 Wise, Robert, 43, 100,
 110
 Withers, Googie, 9

 Zanuck, Daryl F., 9
Zigomar, 17